

NUTRITION

Why should women of childbearing age take folic acid?

Studies show that women who consume the recommended amount of folic acid, beginning before conception and continuing into the first month of pregnancy, reduce their risk of having a baby with certain birth defects of the brain and spine called neural tube defects (NTDs).

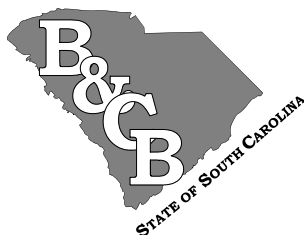
The most common NTDs are spina bifida and anencephaly. Spina bifida is a leading cause of childhood paralysis. Affected children have varying degrees of lower-body paralysis and bladder and bowel control problems. Anencephaly is a fatal condition in which a baby is born with a severe underdeveloped brain and skull. Studies also suggest that folic acid may help prevent some other birth defects as well, including cleft lip and palate.

Since NTDs originate in the first month of pregnancy, before many women know they are pregnant, it is important for a woman to have enough folic acid in her system before pregnancy. Folic acid is recommended for all women of childbearing age because 50 percent of pregnancies in this country are unplanned. The March of Dimes recommends that all women who can become pregnant consume a multivitamin containing 400 micrograms of folic acid daily, in addition to eating a healthy diet including foods rich in folic acid. This is the only sure way a woman can get all the folic acid and other vitamins she needs. Most women get only about 200 micrograms of folic acid a day from their diet.

Foods that are naturally rich in folates (the natural forms of folic acid found in foods) include: orange juice, other citrus fruits and juices, leafy green vegetables, beans, peanuts, broccoli, asparagus, peas, lentils and whole grain products.

The March of Dimes has several research grantees who are seeking to improve the understanding of how folic acid prevents NTDs. Because most NTDs are believed to be caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors, other grantees are trying to identify genes that increase a woman's risk of having a baby with an NTD.

For more information contact your local March of Dimes office or the National March of Dimes office at 1-888-663-4637.



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